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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Left Hand, Right Hand

By Flora Lewis

PARIS, Dec. 15 — For years now, U.S. foreign policy in Central America has been undermined by private or semi-private U.S. groups encouraging the extreme right to disregard official Washington warnings.

A senior State Department official said not long ago that it must be dreadfully confusing for the local politicians. They are told publicly that the U.S. supports democracy and reforms, and opposes death squads and wanton murder of peasants.

But then they hear whispers from Americans who seem influential that all this talk is for public consumption, and that the U.S. backs anyone who fights Communists. The contradiction is widely known in Washington.

The private activities probably violate the Logan Act, passed in 1799 and still on the books. It forbids unauthorized U.S. citizens to deal with foreign governments in an attempt to influence foreign policy, which well-placed people were already trying to do in the earliest days of the Republic. Aaron Burr was an example. The act is considered virtually unenforceable now.

But there are disturbing signs that private involvement in covert actions has substantially expanded well beyond political and economic measures, exemplified by the I.T.T. in Chile before the Pinochet coup, to paramilitary activities.

Whether or not this subverts U.S. policy depends on what the policy really is. In any case, such involvement shields participants from the legal oversight mandated for specially cleared Congressional committees. According to Adm. Stansfield Turner, former C.I.A. Director, it also probably blocks C.I.A. control once operations are launched, risking runaway disasters.

There is an argument in Washington about whether the Administration is deliberately disguising an attempt to overthrow the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua and help the far

right elsewhere, or whether it is lax in reining in its own supporters.

John Carbaugh, the busy former aide to Senator Jesse Helms, said flatly that the C.I.A. was totally in charge, sometimes through private contracts or by accepting "contributions." These seem to include planes and possibly U.S. mercenaries sent to perform sabotage. Mr. Carbaugh has intimate knowledge of devious moves in Central America, but he doesn't hide his contempt for what the C.I.A. is doing.

Phillip Taubman and Jeff Gerth of The New York Times recently tracked several privately owned American planes involved in secret operations, but they haven't been able to pinpoint the source of the orders or the money. Argentine soldiers helped train "contras" in Honduras and plan attacks in Nicaragua before the Falkland war, but they are no longer available, Congressional sources say.

The U.S. military and paramilitary network is now expanding through the region. The Administration says it endorses the efforts of the Latin Contadora group to demilitarize Central America and promote negotiated settlements. But U.S. actions cast doubt on the declarations, even as Henry Kissinger and his commission tour the area preparing to recom-

mend huge sums of economic aid to evolve moderate regimes interested in negotiating.

It is easier to see the political underpinning for the conflicting drive to the right. There are conservative "think tanks" in the Washington area that make a point of having good relations with such ultras as Salvador's Roberto D'Aubuisson and Guatemala's Mario Sandoval Alarcon, who are officially shunned by the U.S. because of their murderous reputations.

Among them are the Council on Inter-American Security, the American Security Council, and the National Strategic Information Center, the last organized in the 1960's by William Casey, now C.I.A. Director. Retired U.S. military officers and former C.I.A. officials are among their active members.

They travel to Central America, and arrange high-level meetings for their friends when they come to Washington. These sessions are then used by the Latins to spread word that they have confirmed secret U.S. Government backing, despite public denunciations. U.S. ambassadors have confided that they are powerless to reverse the impact.

If the policy is what the Administration announces, to promote moderate, democratic regimes capable of social and economic development that will head off Communist advance, then it is being flouted by its servants and friends. If that is only lip service, it is not only deceiving the country and wasting a lot of money, it is compounding the danger.

The jungle of intrigue, undercover attacks and provocation has helped make Central America the mess it is. There have been no successes. More militarization, in collusion with corporations, covert or open with U.S. troops, diminishes the prospects of both security and freedom. Mr. Kissinger should take the hidden side into account in his report.